

# **Networks of coproduction: How journalists and environmental NGOs create common interpretations of the UN climate change conferences**

**Julia Lück, Antal Wozniak, & Hartmut Wessler**

## **Abstract**

This study examines the interrelations between journalists and communication practitioners from environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Taking the annual United Nations climate change conferences as a case in point, we show that the exceptional circumstances of these events foster a temporary blurring of the professional boundaries between both actor groups that partly results in a joint production of interpretations. Based on seventy-eight semistandardized interviews with journalists and NGO representatives, we identify four distinct coproduction networks that pair particular types of journalists and NGO communicators. Our analysis shows that (1) the journalistic beat, (2) the type of media journalists work for, (3) journalists' and NGOs' perceived target audiences, and also (4) the NGOs' strategic orientation toward either lobbying or popular mobilization are decisive for the formation of these networks. Our study helps to systematically explain message production in a transnational context and provides a deeper understanding of the relationship between journalism and public relations.

## **Keywords**

journalism, social movements, environment, global news, news events, news production

Media attention for the issue of climate change has increased around the world during the last fifteen years (Schmidt et al. 2013) with a global peak around the United Nations climate change conference in Copenhagen in December 2009. But even before and after Copenhagen the annual UN conferences (officially called Conferences of the Parties, COPs) are important periodical drivers of media coverage on climate change (Schäfer et al. 2014). These conferences function as catalysts for the emergence of an issue-specific transnational public sphere. “The summits have become an intensive (and exceptional) example of a global mediatized political event where an enormous amount of knowledge production, economic lobbying, civic activism, and bargaining gravitate around potentially consequential political decision making.” (Kunelius and Eide 2012:267–268). The COPs thus uniquely combine the features of three types of events: (a) high-level international political summits (“HIPS”, Adolphsen 2014, 73), i.e. cabinet-rank negotiation events aiming at policy-relevant output; (b) civil society protest and mobilization activities, which often accompany global meetings, especially since the 1999 World Trade Organization summit in Seattle (the “Battle of Seattle”), and (c) global forums dedicated to sharing knowledge and best practice among experts and stakeholders (realized at the COPs in the many side events held alongside the negotiation tracks). In addition, COPs feature a variable element of ritual celebration and symbolic loading reminiscent of the “peace ceremonies” that Liebes and Katz (1997) have studied as media events.

The research presented in this paper focuses on two particularly important actor groups that shape the messages communicated to audiences around the world and, by implication, the national and transnational debates revolving around the COPs, namely journalists and public relations (PR) practitioners from environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS). Transnational ENGOS are increasingly acknowledged for their role in communicating global problems and in linking local contexts to global debates (Reese, 2015). Adolphsen and Lück (2012) stress the idea of coproduction between ENGOS and journalists in the context of the UN climate change conferences, relating to the image and message production from the conference

site. They describe “the emergence of a unique actor constellation involving journalists and political PR professionals that essentially dissolve traditional boundaries between both sides and challenge their usual distribution of tasks” (Adolphsen and Lück 2012:151). Results from their analysis of the 2010 COP in Cancun, Mexico show that the emerging “camp feeling” (journalists and PR professionals working side by side and sharing workspaces) during the two weeks of the conference promotes the mutual supply with information and expertise. Journalists and PR professionals collaboratively create newsworthy information and visuals (ibid.). To broaden the empirical basis and avoid event-specific distortions we study three COPs in this paper: the conferences in Cancun, Mexico (COP16, 2010), Doha, Qatar (COP18, 2012) and Warsaw, Poland (COP19, 2013). More importantly, we aim at finding explanations for coproduction processes by asking: Which are the decisive factors and underlying mechanisms that shape coproduction between journalists and PR practitioners from ENGOs at the UN climate change conferences? Answers to this question will advance our knowledge about strategic political communication as well as PR - journalism relations in transnational settings. To find explanations we apply a method derived from the process-tracing approach developed by George and Bennett (2005) using semi-standardized interviews with journalists and ENGO communicators in addition to participatory observations conducted on-site the conferences, which will be used as ancillary information.

## **Conceptualizing coproduction**

In times of increasing economic pressure on media markets worldwide there is a growing research interest in the relationship between journalists and strategic actors that advocate for certain interests – oftentimes connected to concerns about the quality and independence of journalism (Powers, 2015). As both professions pursue their respective goals and interests, the relationship cannot be free from conflict. Scholars have looked at this relationship from different angles. Some authors emphasize the antagonistic relationship (e.g. Ryan and Martinson 1988; Neijens and Smit 2003), others highlight mutual dependencies and

collaboration (Larsson 2009; White and Hobsbawn 2007). Characterizations of the relationship between these two professions often result from investigations of the use of PR material in the media coverage, specifically from looking at induction and selection quota (Elfenbein 1986; Cameron et al. 1997; Reich 2010; Lewis et al. 2008) or chances of different types of PR to attract media attention (Krøvel 2012). Direct contact and personal source-reporter relationships (Shin and Cameron 2003; Sallot and Johnson 2006) as well as mutual perceptions and expectations (Sallot et al. 1998; Jeffers 1977) have also received scholarly attention. In their Intereffication Model (IE) Bentele and Nothhaft (2008) offer a complex and dynamic description of the relationship between public relations and journalism in industrialized societies with democratic and relatively autonomous media systems. In an attempt to avoid merely metaphorical formulations - such as “love-hate-relationship” (Ryan and Martinson 1988) - the authors coin the term *intereffication* derived from the Latin words “inter” and “efficare”, meaning “to mutually enable.” In the IE model two types of communicative influences are distinguished: Inductions are defined as “intended and directed communicative offers or stimuli” (Bentele and Nothhaft 2008:36) by one of the two systems toward the other; adaptations are defined as communicative organizational adjustments, i.e., “actions by which actors or organizations consciously adapt themselves to changing circumstances [...] in order to maximize their own communicative success” (ibid.). Inductions and adaptations occur simultaneously on both sides but do not neutralize each other - the relationship between the systems (or individual actors within these systems) might be asymmetrical depending on power and resources. Our understanding of coproduction derives from this IE model and acknowledges the idea of mutual enabling through reciprocal action (induction and adaptation) without disregarding that such power differences can be critically imbalanced to a degree that would not be normatively desirable, e.g. in cases where the power of public relations outpaces journalism, rather disabling or even obstructing it.

The very different approaches to conceptualizing the journalism – PR relationship in general are also reflected in the recent scholarly investigations on the relationship of journalism and non-governmental organizations. NGOs pursue a special form of public relations that is usually focused on issues of the common good. This aspect marks an important difference to the common notion of the strategic communication for special interests or economic success to which the scholarly theories usually apply. However, there are enough communalities between traditional PR and the PR of non-governmental organizations with a common-good orientation to apply the concept of intereffication to NGOs. Like many other competitors for attention in the public sphere NGOs face the challenge to be heard and therefore aim at professionalization and use classical PR strategies (Greenberg, Knight and Westersund (2011).

Despite these efforts and a quickly growing media space, however, NGOs still struggle to achieve publicity. Compared to government or business representatives, their representation in the media is rather weak (Powers 2015). Instead of challenging dominant news norms NGOs rather adapt to them, hoping to increase their chances of publicity (ibid.). Our own study contributes to this growing body of research on journalism – NGO relationships by identifying the decisive factors that directly influence interactions and their outcomes. In doing so, we also provide an explanatory basis for the IE model, which in its original form cannot explain under which circumstances we can expect which type of interactions. We also expand the scope of the IE model by accounting for the complex relations between national and transnational actors as well as between actors from different national contexts on both sides.

## **Understanding journalists and environmental NGOs**

Both environmental journalists and ENGOS have been studied before, yet most studies concentrate on one group at a time (Berglez 2011; McCluskey 2008; Giannoulis et al. 2011; Princen 1994; Doyle 2009; Warkentin 2001). Few studies explicitly examine the relationship by regarding both groups and their interplay as well as the ensuing consequences at once even

though the very existence of environmental reporting was closely intertwined with the environmental activism movement emerging during the 1960s: “At the same time, environmental activists began flooding the media with releases, some media began environmental investigative reporting, and public awareness was heightened by a series of ecological disasters.” (Sachsman 1973 cited in Sachsman, Simon and Valenti 2010). By investigating both groups within one study we also aim at clarifying how these historical relations translate today and are actualized in coproduction processes at extraordinary occasions such as the climate change conferences. Although most literature focuses on one of the actor groups in particular we find several hints about factors that may be relevant for coproduction and that are necessary to structure our own empirical investigation.

The group of journalists that cover the COPs is rather heterogeneous. They work for different media types (print, broadcasting, online) and outlets with varying geographical scope (e.g. national, transnational) and thematic focus (e.g. science/environment or business). This diversity leads to important differences in how journalists approach the topic. Fahy and Nisbet (2011), for example, demonstrate that science journalists have a wider spectrum of role perceptions than other journalists. In addition to the more traditional journalistic roles of reporter, conduit, watchdog or agenda-setter, science journalists’ role perceptions also include those of a curator, convener, public intellectual or civic educator. McCluskey (2008) found that newspaper articles on environmental topics written by environmental journalists were more positive towards ENGOs than those written by business, political or general news reporters. Giannoulis et al. (2011) find three distinct types of journalists that mainly cover environmental issues: the “scientifically led, environmentally responsible” journalist, the “environmental crusader” and the “impartial” journalist. This indicates different role perceptions but does not give any explanations for the differences that were detected. Brüggemann and Engesser (2014) find that most journalists who write about climate change agree with the consensus on anthropogenic climate change as put forth by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

(IPCC) and also with common proposals for solutions. They therefore constitute an “interpretive community.” Looking at factors that influence IPCC affirmation, the authors point to two statistically significant correlations. First, environmental journalists are more affirmative than political, general news, and business journalists (the latter were least affirmative). Second, journalists who are more affirmative with the IPCC consensus more often use “a triad of sources: environmentalists, scientific sources (e.g. researchers and their publications), and mass media reports” rather than only one or two of those sources (p.20). For our own considerations this supports the assumption that the varying journalistic orientations of political versus environmental journalists will result in different forms of coproduction. In another recent study, Engesser and Brüggemann (2015) further differentiate journalistic attitudes and opinions by investigating environmental journalists’ cognitive frames of climate change in an international comparative survey. They identify five different cognitive frames and present evidence that certain individual factors such as specialization, professional aims, and political alignment influence journalists’ frames. However, the authors cannot make any claims on the influence of these cognitive frames on the journalists’ working practice and products. Such connections between personal attitudes of journalists and their practices when working with environmental NGOs can, if they exist, further complement the causal picture we are aiming at.

Berglez (2011) focuses more on consequences of journalistic decision making resulting from a particular audience orientation for the journalistic product. As a premise he emphasizes that reporting on climate change entails the necessity to go beyond the usual logic of reporting and “no longer frame events and places as either domestic or foreign, local or global, but interrelate them.” (p.461). His interviews with Swedish environmental journalists reveal that this challenge is not managed well by most of his interviewees who address national audiences by emphasizing aspects relevant for their national context. Journalists retain the traditional bifurcated logic when they report transnational issues and events for national audiences and

focus on the domestic ramifications. We therefore expect audience orientation to be quite influential for the work of journalists in the climate change context.

To sum up, journalists who report about environmental issues, besides sharing a common issue focus, differ substantially in their own role perception (Fahy and Nisbet 2011; Giannoulis et al. 2011), their attitudes towards the issue (Engesser and Brüggemann 2015) and different sources (McCluskey 2008), their audience orientations and reporting styles when it comes to the treatment of scientific uncertainty and critique (Brüggemann and Engesser 2014) as well as their national versus transnational orientation in making sense of the issue (Berglez 2011). If these diverse journalists are confronted with ENGOs at the COPs, we expect a spectrum of distinct relationships. Given that the literature does not offer support for concrete, directed hypotheses our study aims at identifying that spectrum of relations in the first place.

The role of ENGOs on the global stage should be viewed against the background of political PR in modern societies where all different kinds of interest groups try to influence politics, media and public opinion (Davis 2002). ENGOs have realized that they need to influence politics on a global scale to support structural changes and therefore support local projects on the one side and address the causes of global problems on the other (Princen 1994). To do so, ENGOs try to promote their issues, analyses and proposals for solutions through international agenda building and international frame building (Sheafer and Gabay, 2009).

By and large, ENGO activities can be divided into two main pillars: lobbying and mobilizing. Several studies on NGO communication strategies reflect this basic distinction. Princen (1994), for example, shows that NGOs create media attention to address the general public, draw attention and promote communication (e.g. via publicity stunts, mass mailings, and local organizing) - activities aimed at mobilizing (potential) support. On the other hand, NGOs coordinate lobbying and provide scientific knowledge that back up their political claims to convince policy makers to act in their sense. Gough and Shackley (2001) summarize the



strengths of climate-oriented NGOs as they pursue lobbying through advocating certain policy solutions, while at the same time they try to reach broader support through the construction of knowledge and acts of campaigning.

Powers (2014) identified four factors that shape NGOs' publicity strategies: the form of funding, the NGOs' relationship to state authorities, organizational dynamics, and desired audiences and impacts. Beyond that, Powers notes that NGOs do respond to particular media logics but "are not mechanically controlled" (Powers 2014:103) by them. This confirms Waisbord's (2011) findings that the worlds of news making and NGOs are heterogeneous and their relationships multifarious and changing. The Latin American NGOs that he investigated did not challenge the ideology of the newsrooms from which they wanted coverage, but they pursued different strategies that ranged from personally connecting with editors and reporters who would support their causes all the way to collaborating with "news making political elites to get attention" (p.160). NGOs adapt to the media logic and "brand" themselves, use celebrities, regionalize and personalize ready-made media packages and try to avoid scandals (Cottle and Nolan 2007). They even practice "news cloning" by reproducing the normative conceptions of journalism such as news criteria to make messages more newsworthy (Fenton 2010). From Krøvel (2012) we get insights on which kind of information is most successfully distributed by NGOs. Investigating the impact of environmental NGOs on news media in Norway, his results of a quantitative content analysis over a period of 10 years of Norwegian newspaper coverage indicate that those NGOs that rather focus on information and knowledge production are successful in getting representation in the media coverage on climate change. NGOs provide journalists with in-depth expertise on scientific background information and are therefore an important source. The study also highlights that it cannot support earlier findings that media only focus on NGO activities that are supposed to be media-friendly and driven by activism. However, what we do not learn from this study is what the actual interaction looks

like between NGOs and journalists and which mechanisms account for the form of NGO representation in the media.

Resulting from what we know about journalists covering environmental issues and ENGOs we propose a heuristic conceptualization of coproduction and distinguish a number of aspects that have not been looked at systematically before (Figure 1). Even though we present the model in total here it is worth noting that only parts of it existed prior to the analysis and that it was continuously refined as our qualitative data analysis progressed. It serves to clearly demarcate different components of coproduction and to distinguish possible explanatory factors.

[Figure 1 about here]

We assume that the journalistic beat (political versus environmental) on the one hand and the strategic orientations of ENGOs (lobbying versus mobilizing) on the other hand structure what we call cognitive and social preconditions of coproduction. On the cognitive side the literature mentioned above suggests that different professional orientations go along with different perceptions of one's own professional role and the role of the respective other side, with expectations concerning the interaction and notions concerning the respective target audience. Concerning the social preconditions we assume that different professional orientations on the part of both journalists and ENGOs result in different kinds of professional networks that either side establishes and maintains. Journalists' and PR professionals' own strategic media use in pursuit of relevant information needed for the job will equally vary with these professional orientations.

Furthermore, we suggest that the actual manifestations of coproduction should be influenced by these cognitive and social preconditions. We propose a distinction between behavioral patterns of coproduction and the consonance of interpretations shared by journalists and PR professionals. On the behavioral level coproduction is manifested in the frequency and intimacy of professional contacts, by instances of actual collaboration, as well as by the choice of

particular presentation strategies. However, coproduction can also become manifest in shared interpretations between journalists and PR professionals concerning the relevance of the issue of climate change and the respective COP, concerning the main story or message associated with a particular COP, and the level of conflict perceived. Common interpretations can also extend to shared opinions between journalists and NGOs with respect to particular issue frames propagated by different stakeholders or to shared perceptions of what constitutes the most striking or effective images used to represent a particular COP.

In sum, the heuristic model serves two functions. First, it helps us to sort the remarks that interviewees have made into specific categories and compare them with other remarks on the same aspect of coproduction. Second and more importantly, the model guides the causal process tracing by directing our attention to possible explanatory relations between variables on the left side and those in the middle and on the right.

## **Method**

To investigate coproduction processes between journalists and ENGOS, we conducted three comprehensive case studies at the COPs in Cancun, Mexico (November 29 to December 10, 2010), Doha, Qatar (November 26 to December 8, 2012), and Warsaw, Poland (November 11 to November 23, 2013). Access to the conferences was gained through accreditation as an official observer organization with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Our semi-standardized interviews were conducted on-site the conferences with 36 journalists from nine countries (Germany, the United States, South Africa, Brazil, India, Britain, Mexico, Qatar, Poland) and transnational news agencies (AP, Reuters, Bloomberg), as well as with 16 representatives from transnational NGOs (Climate Action Network, Friends of the Earth, Climate Analytics, Global Call for Climate Action, Greenpeace International, One World, Oxfam and WWF International). Some respondents were interviewed more than once over the

years, resulting in a total of 78 interviews. Country sampling followed two main criteria: First, we interviewed journalists from the political and economically most important democratic country in each of the five major continents (Germany for Europe, the USA for North and Brazil for South America, India for Asia and South Africa for Africa) in order to gain insights into how coproduction plays out under conditions of press freedom across the globe. Second, journalists from each of the three COP host countries (Mexico, Qatar and Poland) were interviewed to gauge possible influences produced by the access of host country journalists to information from the respective conference leadership. Finally, British journalists were added because the “Guardian” was consistently named as an extremely important information source for journalists by many respondents. In the ENGO camp we focused on those NGOs and NGO umbrella organizations that act globally and thus develop PR strategies tailored to influence the interpretation of the COPs across the globe.

The media outlets that we investigate serve as agenda setters and leading media even in a highly fragmented media environment. However, many of the journalists that we have interviewed also produce for the online presence of their media outlet or a personalized blog and oftentimes not all reports that are published online automatically find their way into the paper or newscast. Beyond that, we know from our interviews that even in highly competitive media environments NGOs still take pride in placing stories in mainstream news agencies and media outlets as these promise higher levels of outreach. NGOs’ own media products or outlets try to respond to the lack of attention from traditional media (Powers, 2015), but attention from traditional media is still a crucial metric of success<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> In a small side study we also investigated the social media activities of government delegations and NGOs. We found huge variation worldwide in how social media are used, some delegations and NGOs do nothing in that direction, so that social media seem like an addition to the core mass media-directed activities at the COPs. These findings support our decision to concentrate on traditional media.

Interviews lasted between 15 and 45 minutes, were mostly conducted in English and digitally recorded. A small number of interviews had to be conducted via telephone after the conference had ended. In order to obtain candid answers most interviews were conducted under the condition of anonymity so that individual quotes from the interviews presented in this paper cannot be traced back to individual interviewees. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed with the help of the software MaxQDA.

Distinct interview guides for both professional groups were developed deductively based on relevant literature and subsequently improved through team discussions. For the later case studies in Doha and Warsaw, both interview guides were reviewed before the conferences to make modifications where further clarification or elaboration seemed necessary. This was the case for the specification of respondents' contact to others, which was recorded more precisely in the Doha questionnaire, as well as the consonance of frame interpretations, which was a main research focus in Warsaw (see the Appendix for the list of issue frames used in the Warsaw interviews).

In order to identify relevant factors and underlying mechanisms that explain coproduction we pursue a process tracing approach following George and Bennett (2005:206): "The process-tracing method attempts to identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain or causal mechanism – between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable". We derived a number of factors from the literature that are likely to influence coproduction but since there is no elaborate theory on coproduction yet our model clearly needs to be understood as a heuristic that gives hints on what to look for while analysing the interviews. The limited state of research especially regarding the existence of explanatory factors that underlie intereffication mechanisms precludes explicit hypothesis testing in this case. The interviews were analyzed by way of stepwise qualitative content analysis as

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developed by Mayring (2002). The interviews were first read to identify all statements that refer to aspects in the heuristic model or suggest additional elements for that model. Statements relating to the same category in the model were paraphrased in order to simplify them and make them more general. These paraphrased statements were then grouped across interviews to identify patterns and typical connections between the aspects in the data. Such patterns were then visualized in a complex network structure (see Figure 2). In this paper we do not have enough space to recount the qualitative discovery process. Instead we offer network descriptions based on the final product of our analysis and enrich these with exemplary quotes from the original interviews.

## Results

Looking at our journalistic interview sample first we find that our proposed distinction between environmental and political/news journalists is insightful when it comes to coproduction processes. Of the 36 journalistic interviewees 21 can be classified as environmental journalists (of which 5 have a business focus) and 15 are more general news reporters (12 of these have a focus on political news, three have a business focus). 19 out of the 21 environmental journalists maintain close contacts with NGO representatives but only 6 out of 15 general news journalists report closer contact to ENGOs at the conferences.<sup>2</sup>

Our analysis reveals four distinct networks of coproduction as presented in Figure 2. Each network is crucially defined by (a) the media type for which journalist members of the network primarily work (transnational media, national media, international news agencies and business

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<sup>2</sup> The numbers reported here are indicative but should not be read as exact proportions. In this qualitative interview study we cover journalists from the nine target countries and communicators from global ENGOs present at the COPs remarkably well, but we do not claim exhaustiveness or statistical representativeness for our sample.

media) as well as the main target audiences at which communication is directed (policy makers, general national publics, general or well-informed international publics, or business audiences).

[Figure 2 about here]

### *Network 1: Transnational media and global ENGOs*

The first network consists of environmental journalists from transnational media (four journalists in our sample) and global ENGO communicators who put an emphasis on lobbying (eight interviewees), mainly head communicators from global ENGOs such as Climate Action Network International (CAN-I), Friends of the Earth International (FoEI), or the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF). Three out of the four transnational journalists work for globally distributed media outlets that are directly addressed to the end-user rather than to other media for further processing. The fourth transnational journalist works for a specialized news agency, which is, however, also targeted at individual subscribers interested in specialized information on climate change. These transnational journalists in network 1 address their coverage to people who are directly involved and/or highly interested in the issue of climate change. This includes a well-informed international public as well as policy makers, who can be delegates present at the conference or national politicians in countries around the world. These audiences are at the same time highly relevant for the global NGO communicators in this first network. These are the people to whom they try to distribute their messages hoping to influence their decisions. They also maintain direct contact to policy makers on-site the conference as well as to national politicians at home and therefore perceive transnationally distributed media (e.g. The Guardian, The New York Times, CNN) as most influential and therefore most useful in reaching these audiences. Within this network journalists and NGO representatives tend to have long-lasting trustful personal relationships.

The transnational journalists try to account for the global scope of the issue. They do not look at information from a particular national angle and do not aim at breaking down the information

in order to emphasize the relevance for a specific national audience. Instead, they concentrate on the main players (above all the EU, USA, China) and overall conference proceedings (especially on finance and emission reduction targets). Transnational journalists do not perceive themselves as educators of the general public but rather as providers of sophisticated information that provokes debate for people engaged and highly interested in the topic of climate change. In order to fulfill this role, these journalists are in need of information on what is going on behind closed doors in the negotiations to which they do not have direct access. Therefore, they try to glean insider information as well as context material from ENGO representatives. Sometimes, NGO representatives are even involved in negotiations and can provide journalists with first-hand insights:

“In some other countries they allow non-profits or students to be part of their delegation and [they] can go inside the closed rooms. A lot of the NGOs, because they work in different countries are very plugged into what ... - you know, say, the Ethiopian delegation is doing a hearing or the Bangladesh delegation, and so we rely a lot on them to tell us, you know, the things that we can't get into.” (transnational journalist 2)

However, the journalists in this network are well aware of the NGO's strategic orientation. As one journalist put it: “NGOs use us and we use them.” (transnational journalist 1) – which clearly expresses the reciprocal relationship between the two actor groups. Interviewees from both groups were not only able to name organizations on the respective other side that are most interesting for them, but also called their counterparts by their names. Network members meet rather informally in the hallways and workspaces, over coffee, or give each other a quick call or e-mail if some question or interesting detail arises. NGOs provide written information as well, but do not neglect the personal contact:

“I think for the media, more than just giving them a press release that you want to get covered, it is really that long-term relationship-building with them that matters. You know, that credibility is a big factor.” (ENGO 1)

The informal personal contact is highly valued for the exclusive information it might yield. But it also entails the risk that personnel changes and thus information channels run dry.



We find interesting similarities in interpretation between global NGO communicators and transnational environmental reporters in this network. In Warsaw, the three transnational journalists named “loss and damage” as well as “finance” as the central aspects.<sup>3</sup> Both topics were also named by the ENGOs as central for them. The three journalists all called Warsaw a “transitional COP” and a necessary step on the road to an agreement. This view was shared by the representatives of two of the ENGOs, whereas another emphasized that all COPs are highly important moments for decision making. Asking for the level of conflict experienced at the COP, we found one journalist stating that there is not much conflict as well as the representative from the first ENGO emphasizing the constructive and collegial atmosphere. A second ENGO representative detects the same level of conflict in these highly competitive moments where many different interests clash, and the third highlights the ongoing conflict between developing countries and developed countries. The two other journalists both underlined the strong frustration resulting from mutual accusations between the major players during the conference. Although these assessments seem different at first glance they indicate a certain level of routine and background knowledge among these experienced actors who constantly perceive the fundamental conflicts underlying the entire negotiation process even if these do not come to the surface at all times during the COPs. Comparing journalists’ and ENGO assessments on the issue frames we provided in the Warsaw interviews (see Appendix) we do not find contradicting evaluations between the two groups although NGO representatives generally support or object to a particular frame more clearly. Journalists show more reluctance towards positioning themselves on the political subtexts of the frames but when they give an assessment they express opinions that are quite close to the NGO assessments.

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<sup>3</sup> Climate negotiations at the COPs are organized into several topical streams. Two of them focus on what to do about permanent “loss and damage” already incurred by changing climate conditions and on financial assistance to poorer countries to cope with the effects of climate change, respectively.

### *Network 2: National media and national ENGO branches*

The second network displayed in figure 2 consists of journalists from national media (14 journalists in our sample, of which three are political and 11 are environmental reporters) addressing general national publics and representatives from ENGO member organizations and local, regional or national branches and bureaus (nine interviewees). Reporters who mainly produce for domestically oriented media outlets mostly maintain contact to ENGO representatives from their own countries. These ENGO representatives, in turn, are involved in the communication within their global organizations or networks and transport messages that are then negotiated on these higher levels. They mainly aim at bringing these messages to the attention of broad domestic audiences in order to raise awareness and readiness to act. It is crucial for this network that ENGO representatives help journalists understand the conference proceedings and the course of the negotiations in general. Journalists produce their coverage for a general national audience and mostly seek information relating to their home countries. They want to produce reports that help their audiences understand how climate change is relevant to their lives and countries. For most of the journalists in this network, their respective national delegations constitute the first or favorite contact points but delegations are not always easily approachable. That is why journalists especially value NGOs as intermediaries.

ENGOS appreciate this need for information as a chance to place their messages. While many ENGOS directly support projects and actively implement help and support for people and the environment, they use the conferences to bring forward their political arguments and demands and they “also want to use this as a time to showcase own efforts.” (ENGO 5). Many ENGOS have policy staff at the COP who monitor negotiations in addition to communications staff who develop messages and create photo opportunities in order to “ensure attention of the non-specialist kind of an audience” (ENGO 5). Comprehensibility is an important keyword for the information provided to journalists in this network. ENGOS explain the technical and scientific details to journalists for them to work with in their coverage in order to build up public pressure:

“On the one hand, you want to have as much public attention as possible to ensure that there is a lot of pressure to get the most ambitious outcomes, that governments really feel that the public is supportive of strong climate action and all these sorts of things.”  
(ENGO 6)

The direct contact between ENGO representatives and journalists is more formal in this nationally-focused network than in the transnational network described above. Press conferences are the central occasions for journalists and ENGO PR professionals to meet on a regular basis. ENGOs meet beforehand, prepare their own press conference, gather the information they need to communicate and prepare their spokespeople (oftentimes experts or representatives from national offices). Journalists plan their day in consideration of their deadlines and the press conferences and side events scheduled for the day. Most journalists take notice of press releases that are usually sent out via mailing lists and use them as a hint to find useful interview partners or events that might be interesting for coverage<sup>4</sup>.

Assessments on the main story of the COP differ among the journalists and NGO representatives in this network as well as between both groups. Many journalists in this network named the second commitment period to the Kyoto Protocol as the main story of Doha and “loss and damage” as the main story in Warsaw whereas ENGO representatives concentrated on messages about finance issues and mitigation efforts. More unity can be detected with respect to assessments of relevance: There was a broad agreement among most network members that Warsaw was a “transitional COP” where particular steps toward the decisive COP to be held in Paris in 2015 had to be negotiated but no far-reaching breakthrough could be expected.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the “Eco Bulletin” by CAN International is a newsletter published and printed daily during environmental conferences since 1972. It is especially valued by journalists as a source of information on where the negotiations are going and what demands NGOs are pushing.

Looking at frame interpretations, we find high agreement in the direction and strength of elaboration between journalists and ENGO representatives in this network. The only truly striking difference concerns the “weighting uncertainty” frame where journalists emphasize the second half of the frame statement (scientific certainty on climate change and its expectable impacts) whereas ENGO representatives explicitly object to the premise in the first half, i.e. that money would be wasted if the dire scientific forecasts should prove wrong. For ENGOs it is important to emphasize that all actions taken against climate change today have genuinely positive effects, e.g. on people’s health, which seems for them an important strategic message to convince politicians to take action.

### *Network 3: International news agencies and (global and national) ENGOs*

A third network consists of ENGO representatives (global communicators as well as representatives from regional or national branches) as well as political reporters from international news agencies (three reporters in our sample) who address general international publics by collecting information on all aspects of the issue and providing it to media outlets around the world. In Cancun, for example, AP had a team of five writers, two photographers, two camera operators and several technical staff members to facilitate video transmission. In Warsaw, Reuters had four writers and two camera operators. Crew members meet daily at small editorial meetings to allocate events and topics to be covered. To track all important developments, the NGOs are useful sources for wire reporters, too. NGO voices are often used to balance news agency reporting, especially as a counterweight to national delegations and industry perspectives.

To obtain information news agency reporters contact NGO representatives broadly before and during the conference. Wire reporters have a couple of contact persons whom they know but do not maintain very close relationships characterized by trustful permanent exchange. Their relations are more formal in the sense of a traditional journalist-source relationship. ENGOs are

one source among others in the attempt to cover as many aspects as possible. Beyond that, ENGOs themselves create information for wire reporters particularly through protest events and photo opportunities that routinely attract photographers and camera people from international news agencies.

Communication between wire reporters and ENGOs mostly takes places through press conferences where journalists gather information as well as official statements through interviews. ENGOs try to deliver their information to the news agencies usually via press releases. ENGO interviewees reported to us that it counts as a great success to place a story with one of the international wire services. It is more difficult for ENGOs to meet news agency reporters personally because news agency teams have their own offices or booths in the conference media center and are thus less accessible through interaction in public work spaces.

Actual manifestations of coproduction are more difficult to detect in this network than in the two former ones.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, generally speaking, news agency reporters have a professional self-understanding predicated on a multiplicity of voices in textual reporting, but certainly value NGO-produced photo opportunities and publicity stunts in much the same way as other journalists do. Thus, they frequently pick up NGO messages and assessments by giving them attention and using them as contrasting positions to politicians and business representatives.

#### *Network 4: Business media and global ENGOs*

The fourth network that our analysis revealed matches environmental reporters working for business newspapers (five reporters) that address business audiences with an interest in the economic aspects of the issue with global ENGO communicators. These journalists focus on the effects and consequences that decisions at the COP might have for economies and markets

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<sup>5</sup> Not all news agency reporters with frequent NGO contact were interviewed at all three COPs studied here and only one was interviewed in Warsaw and therefore had the chance to answer questions on issue frame assessment, which leaves our information on consonance of interpretations rather patchy.

(both national and global). The journalists in this fourth network are thus not classical environmental reporters but have been writing as business reporters on environmental issues for years. Renewable energy, emission reduction, carbon trading, green economy in general are at the center of their work. They write for a specialized business audiences, i.e. people who either have stakes in green business or who are generally interested in how climate change policy will affect their business.

Much like journalists in networks 1 and 2 the economic journalists highly value ENGO's expertise and insider knowledge. They maintain close and trustful relationships to individual ENGO representatives whom they have known for years. These business-oriented environmental journalists emphasize more often than other interviewees that they tap into special NGO expertise on specific sub-issues, initiatives or targeted programs in climate change mitigation.

All journalists but one in this last network were interviewed in Doha 2011 and we thus lack information on their issue frame assessments. Concerning the consonance of interpretations, we thus rely on their assessments concerning the main story, the conference's relevance and the perceived conflict - and find high agreement on these points. The strongest congruence between journalists and ENGO representatives in these networks is found on the assessment of the importance of the finance aspects and a binding treaty. However, the journalists generally assign less relevance to COP 18 (in Doha) where they do not see much progress to be made even though the conferences in principle are perceived to be serious international forums that generally have the capacity to be turning points in global climate policy. Journalists and ENGO representatives in this network agree that the low expectations towards the COP in Doha underrate its potential for finding solutions.

### *Journalists without or with less NGO connections*

In our journalistic interview sample we find eleven journalists that reported no or only very few and loose connections to and/or little interest in ENGOs at the COPs. These journalists differ in their audience orientation as well as in the perception of their own professional role. Nevertheless, they converge on two main reasons for their reluctant contact with NGO representatives. First, these journalists clearly focus on obtaining first-hand information from individual delegations who invite them for background briefings on a regular basis.

“To be frank, I don’t find the NGOs that helpful at these meetings. [...] Frankly, they come here to see each other and to try and get quoted in newspapers. It’s the delegates even more than their press people that I find most useful. [The delegation press officer from the home country] will sometimes talk with a small group of reporters on background, about what’s really going on.” (news journalist 3)

Second, journalists in this group expressed caution against the ENGO’s spin on the issue. They certainly keep an eye on NGO activity, e.g. protests and public statements, and sometimes include a paragraph on a demonstration in their writing. They also attend NGO press conferences and use them as background context but treat the information given to them with a certain suspicion knowing that this information is naturally colored by the NGO’s ideology. On some occasions, NGOs might provide an interesting point of view that some of these journalists would use to confront delegations with.

Last but not least, it should be noted that of course the networks presented are not set in stone. As usual in qualitative research especially when building groups and classifying types of actors not all cases fit one type in pure form. At some points, decisions have to be made to categorize people according to dominant characteristics or practices. This means, for example, that transnational journalists can at some point focus on issues highly relevant for the domestic audience of their outlet’s home country.

## Conclusion

The complicated and often antagonistic relationship between journalists and PR professionals faces rather unusual circumstances at the UN climate change conferences. The complexity of the issue and, even more significantly, the “camp feeling” that develops due to two weeks of confinement to one conference location are conducive to processes of coproduction. These circumstances are in many ways different from the day-to-day work of both actor groups, especially because of the denseness of the event that progresses constantly and provides occasions for interactions that go back and forth and back again until they pause at the end of the conference, only to resume at the next COP. Instances of spontaneous communication or communication by chance in moments of idling during the conferences’ daily routines occur more easily and add to a blurring of the lines in professional relationships.

We have shown that within these particular circumstances the Intereffication Model (Bentele and Nothaft 2008) serves as a useful base to understand the communicative processes between the actor types as it strengthens our awareness of mutual influences and adjustments. However, the Intereffication Model is limited in its power to explain different patterns in journalism – PR relationships. With the results of our analysis we can elucidate production processes that shape the global image of the climate change conferences in much greater detail. The process tracing approach that we have applied in order to identify causal mechanisms between the relevant factors and outcomes has revealed distinct connections between structural parameters and professional orientations of the actors and cognitive and social preconditions of coproduction as well as between such preconditions and the actual manifestations of coproduction in both behavior and interpretations (see Figure 1). Our in-depth analysis shows that coproduction works differently within subgroups of our actor sample. Thus our general model can now be specified for these subgroups, and factors that decisively shape the coproduction relationships in each network can be identified. Very generally, we show that the journalistic beat is influential as is the type of media outlet for which journalists work. The latter is crucial for their



audience orientation as well as for the understanding of their own role, which both constitute important preconditions of coproduction. Manifestations of coproduction differ accordingly – whether journalists need sophisticated background information from long established personal relationships or occasional alerts on upcoming highlights from situational contacts.

Looking at the same process from the NGO side, the strategic orientations of the globally acting ENGOs are most consequential for the ensuing mode of coproduction. When ENGO communicators concentrate their strategy on mobilizing broad audiences and their own supporters they will share a professional self-understanding (as a precondition of coproduction) that is focused on setting the media agenda and determining media imagery. When an ENGO decides to focus its strategy on direct lobbying with political decision-makers mass media access is less important and professional self-understanding is more geared toward expert communication and thus toward specialized journalists and delegations, sometimes directly via Twitter. It should be noted, however, that most global NGOs and NGO umbrella organizations we observed during the COPs try to follow both strategies at the same time if they judge the respective COP to be important enough. A global ENGO like Greenpeace or WWF might then bring on both campaigners to organize PR stunts and mobilize supporters as well as policy specialists who try to engage elite-oriented media and national delegations. On the behavioral level the manifestations of coproduction will differ in form between the two strategies, but collaboration is common in both.

In this study the COPs have served as a prism for coproduction patterns between ENGOs and journalists as they uniquely combine high-level negotiation, civil society mobilization, and expert communication. In all three process types NGOs play a distinct role. They have access to negotiations, they engage in lobbying negotiators as well as in mobilizing outside supporters to attain visibility and mount pressure on negotiators, and they provide specialized information and expert assessment. The element of ritual celebration and symbolic loading, to which all

parties involved – government, NGOs, the media and broad audiences – would have to contribute, was somewhat weaker at the COPs we study here than at COP 15 in Copenhagen (and possibly at COP 21 in Paris in 2015) so that this element cannot serve as a forth domain of NGO – journalist interaction in our analysis.

What, then, can we learn from our case study about journalist – NGOs interactions in transnational political communication more broadly? When we try to analytically generalize our findings, we would expect to see more of the coproduction type exemplified by the news agency network 3 when we turn to inter-governmental negotiation events such as the EU and G7/G8 summits or the multi-party negotiations about Iran’s nuclear program concluded in 2015: News agency journalists will collaborate with governments and other stakeholders in making sense of the power dynamics and the policy outcome of such events, but NGOs will be sidelined as one, relatively minor, type of source among others. In contrast, the transnational network 1, in which elite-oriented media collaborate with specialized NGO experts, as well as the business media network 4, which is built on domain-specific expertise, are more likely to be found at global conferences aimed at sharing knowledge and best practice such as, for example, the global AIDS Conferences. Conversely, conferences marked by strong civil society mobilization as well as summits drawing extensive civil society “counter-summitting” activities such as the World Social Forum or Rio+20 might see a strong element of the network 2-type coproduction, in which NGOs try to mobilize broad audiences through protests and symbolic actions aimed at national media, and some media virtually join the mobilization in an effort to capture their audiences’ presumed inclinations.

The main theoretical contribution of our study lies in moving beyond wholesale characterizations of the roles of “the media” and “the NGOs.” Instead we specify four coproduction patterns that we hypothesize will recur in other transnational contexts and will structure the relationship of the news media and civil society actors more broadly. In addition,

our analytical model also shows the significance of specific cognitive and social preconditions such as perceptions of target audiences and journalists' long-standing source networks in determining the level and type of coproduction between NGOs and journalists. Finally, our analysis draws attention to the influence of situational micro-contexts of media production often ignored in attempts to analyze general professional conduct. Our observations and interviews strongly suggest that unplanned personal interaction does influence what gets said and written even in contexts of strong deadline pressure.

Of course, a focused case study such as ours also entails certain limitations. First, both actor groups we have studied are certainly very important in the global communication process but for all journalists interviewed, country delegations were highly important sources, too, although they are often less accessible than NGOs. For a complete picture of coproduction at the COPs, therefore, delegations should be brought into the picture in subsequent analyses. Furthermore, as we have seen, the agreement on anthropogenic climate change is high among environmental and climate change journalists. To further test the relevance of common interpretations as a manifestation of NGO-journalist coproduction more generally it seems promising to study a second subject in comparison that is more controversial in its basic assumptions than climate change. The issues of poverty/hunger and terrorism/civil war seem to lend themselves to such an approach. With our present contribution we hope to have furnished a basis for subsequent explanatory analyses of coproduction. Such analyses remain important precisely because the specific configurations of coproduction mould the content of national and transnational media debates in consequential ways and thus determine the success of strategic transnational agenda- and frame-building efforts.

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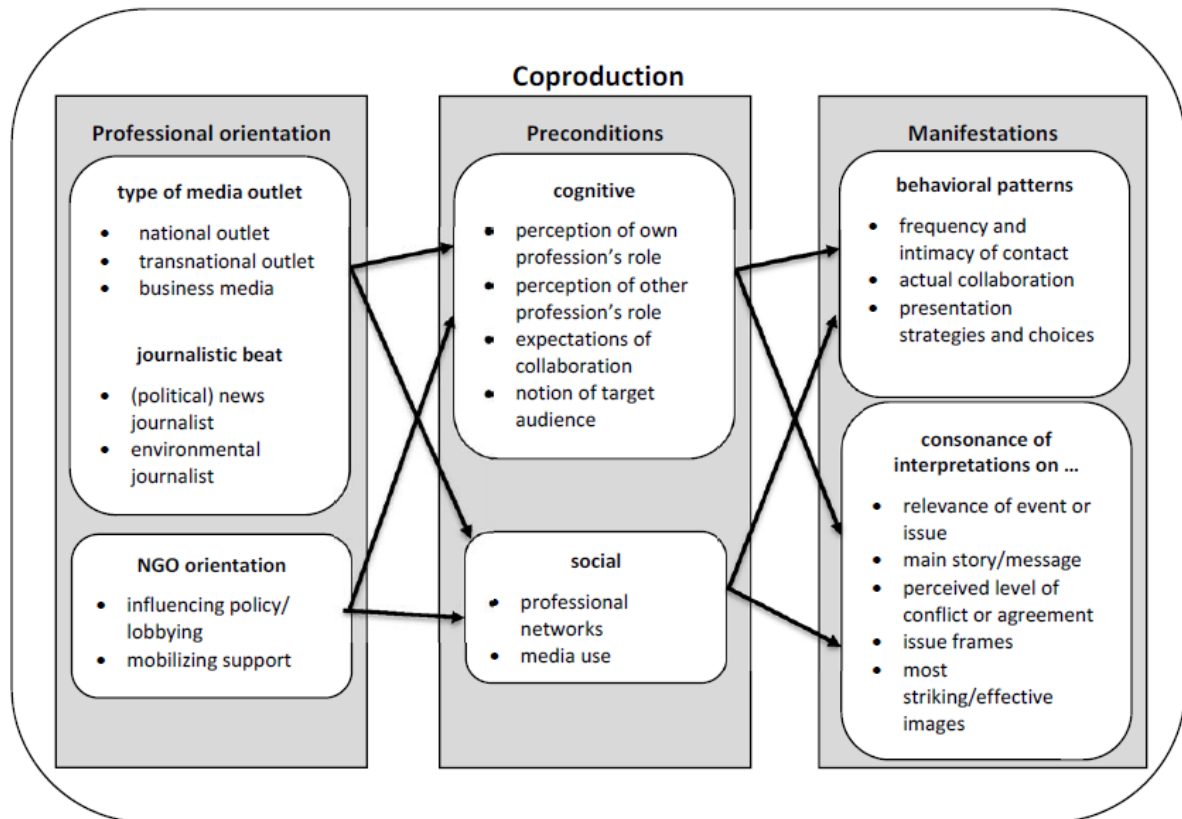
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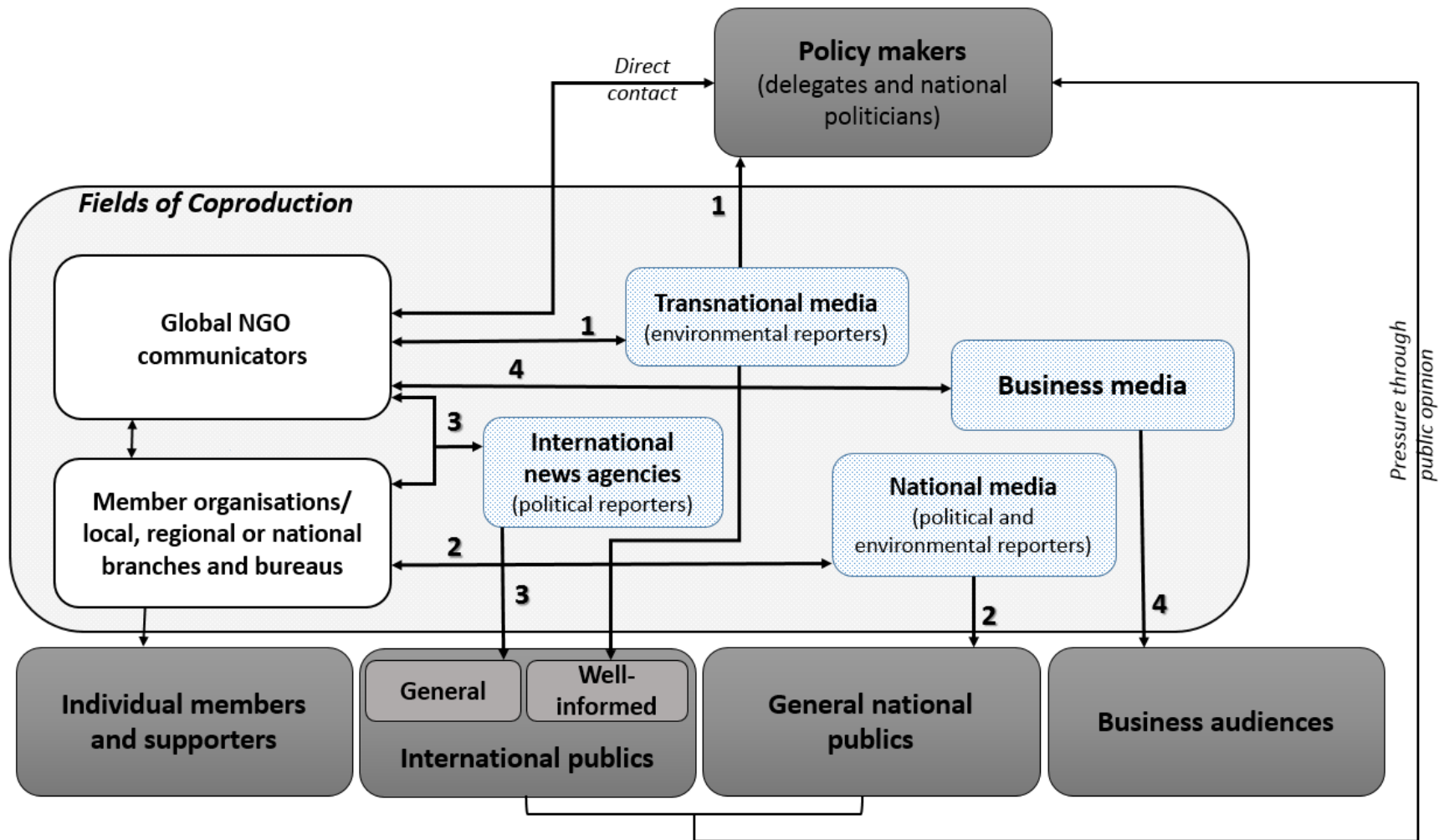
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**Figure 1** Heuristic model of coproduction processes



**Figure 2** Networks of coproduction



## Appendix

The following five issue frames were derived from the literature (e.g. Shehata and Hopmann, 2012; Nisbet, 2009; Nielsen and Schmidt Kjærgaard, 2011; Gordon, Deines and Havice. 2010; Schlichting, 2013), past interviews and media debates at the time of the Warsaw conference (COP 19). The frame statements were shown or read to interviewees in Warsaw for an assessment of their agreement on a five point scale ranging from -2 to +2. Interviewees were also asked to elaborate on each frame, assess its importance in the debate and name actors who would try to place such a frame in the debate. In analyzing the data the agreement ratings and elaborations were then used to assess the degree of frame consonance between journalists and ENGO PR representatives as a manifestation of coproduction.

1. **Common but differentiated:** Industrial nations have a historic responsibility for climate change. Therefore, it is their obligation to carry out actions that remedy or mitigate the consequences of climate change. Inequality of economic, social and institutional developmental conditions between the developed and developing world justify differentiated emission reduction obligations, the general obligations of cooperation in technology transfer, and financial assistance for mitigation and adaptation for developing countries.
2. **Inefficient UNFCCC:** The UNFCCC process is inefficient. There will not be any significant progress towards saving the planet from climate change under the current conditions of the climate change conferences. Bilateral or smaller multilateral agreements would be more effective in fighting climate change.
3. **Dominance of economic interests:** Strong economic interests determine the negotiations. Influential economic actors hinder real progress by lobbying for their stakes behind the scenes. This pertains to carbon-intensive as well as low-carbon industry lobbying groups that have a grip on political actors.

4. **Weighting uncertainty:** If the world acts against climate change even if it turns out to be less problematic than the science has predicted, the worst thing that could happen is that a lot of money will have been spent for nothing. If the world does not act against climate change and it turns out as bad as the science has predicted, the worst thing that could happen is an ecologic, social and economic catastrophe.
5. **More relevant social problems:** Climate change is only one issue amongst a whole range of problems that societies are facing. Secure jobs for people as well as affordable energy and other resources are at least equally important - if not more important - at the moment.